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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 004307

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TAGS: PREL PBTS MARR MOPS OSCE GG RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIA/GEORGIA: BAKRADZE VISIT FAILS TO EASE TENSIONS

REF: MOSCOW 4008 (EXDIS)

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1
.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Russian MFA South Ossetia negotiator Yuriy Popov told us August 31 that visiting Georgian State Minister Bakradze did not hit it off well with DFM Karasin. The Russians appear to take Bakradze seriously. Popov worried that the planned "Peace March" to Tskhinvali could elicit a provocative military response from the "unreliable" Kokoity. Popov thought this might scupper the planned JCC meeting in September; he will travel to Georgia late next week. Popov thought the Georgian arrest of two North Ossetian peacekeepers was another provocation that could cause a harsh reaction in the North Caucasus. He reiterated that Russia would like to return South Ossetia to Georgia as they are "expensive clients," but admitted that there are strong forces in Russia that want to recognize South Ossetia, in part to "challenge" Washington, if Kosovo achieves independence. END SUMMARY.

"Only Moderately Offensive"

¶2. (C) Popov said he had dropped out of DFM Karasin's August 30 meeting with Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution Bakradze and Manjgaladze. He had to make room Deputy Security Council Secretary Nazarov and one of his deputies, Kolesnikov. But he had learned the discussion was not productive. "We recognize that we have to talk with them and not pretend that they don't exist," he said. But Karasin and Bakradze had "widely different approaches," and did not hit it off in this, their first meeting since Bakradze assumed the Ministry. Karasin appeared to understand that Bakradze is a serious player, describing him as "intelligent," "with a strong grasp of detail," and "only moderately offensive."

¶3. (C) Underlying the meeting's fruitlessness was Russian sensitivity over the August 6 bombing incident in Tsitlubani, Georgia. Popov said the U.S. "knows as well as

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we do that this was a Georgian plane." We assured him that it would be impossible to convince the USG that the plane was not Russian, but our aim is not to politicize the incident: rather, our goals are to prevent a repetition of such provocations while getting the normalization of Georgian-Russian relations back on track.

The Immediate Train-Wrecks...

4, (C) Popov was not sanguine about progress. Karasin and Bakradze agreed that the Joint Coordinating Commission plenary should go ahead as scheduled in Tbilisi in September.

But Popov thought the meeting would be derailed once again. He said the Georgian-organized "Peace March" to Tskhinvali would produce a harsh reaction from South Ossetian leader Kokoity, including the cancellation of the JCC and re-emplacement of roadblocks to block movement along highways used by Georgians to reach the areas of South Ossetia they administer. He said Russia had previously prevailed upon Kokoity to cancel a provocative military parade he had planned for an anniversary in September; Kokoity was planning to import hardware from outside the zone of conflict for the march. If the Georgian-organized "peace march" goes ahead, Kokoity may renege on his word. Karasin is sending Popov to Tbilisi and Tskhinvali next week to calm the situation down (Abkhazia negotiator Chernov will also go, but later; South Ossetia is considered the more dangerous for the moment).

¶ 5. (C) Popov also complained about the Georgian detention of two North Ossetian members of the Joint Peace-Keeping Force on charges of taking part in kidnappings. Popov claimed the OSCE mission had determined the men were not involved, but the Georgians were still holding them -- sheer provocation, in the Russian view. Worse, Popov had been receiving "harsh" telephone calls on the issue from Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia.

Popov implied that the arrests could produce a strong reaction in Russia's restive North Caucasus.

¶ 6. (C) Popov expressed dislike for Kokoity, saying the Russian MFA view is that he is unreliable and erratic. However, Kokoity has strong supporters in Moscow, some motivated by "material interests," others by political. He said that in his view, Russia wants to unburden itself of South Ossetia and leave these "expensive clients" to Georgia. He reiterated his preferred scenario for bringing this about

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...And The Big One Looming

¶ 7. (C) Popov recognized that Kosovo could derail all his hopes. He said that some in Moscow are pushing for recognition of South Ossetia, should Kosovo achieve independence. The primary motivation of recognition would be to "challenge" Washington.

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